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A Stage of Memory

By

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Fine, crystalline powder lay scattered along the cracked molding between the mattress and the wall. The tiny white grains met crumpled tissues and hairballs under the lip of a dingy fitted sheet. They sparkled incongruously along a thin trail across the floor of Derek's shabby room, reflecting where, it seemed to Derek, there wasn't any light.

The ripped windowshade cast a jagged knife of daylight on faded *Variety* clippings taped to the opposite wall. The outline looked like the tapering gap between a pair of legs... the legs of a runner in mid-stretch, making time against the plaster.

Derek Blakeney contemplated the runner.

Headless, torsoless, it had started over near his closet, narrow and slow. As the afternoon wore on, the shadow widened and the jogger seemed to catch its stride, legs reaching like a steeplechaser's. Its progress across the wall became terrific... a yard, at least, in the last twenty minutes.

At last Phiddipides crossed the finish line and expired in the shadow of the closet door.

Evening. A time for decisions.

He had known all along what his choice would be. Derek's hands trembled as he reached for the shoebox by the foot of the bed, his unbuttoned cuffs revealing an uneven chain of needle tracks.

Bless the mercy law, he contemplated as he opened the box and took out a sterilized package. *Bless the legislators who legalized the paraphernalia, the syringes and needles, so those on the low road won't have to share it with hepatitis and tetanus.*

He broke the sealed wrapper and pushed the bright needle through the rubber cap

of a tiny bottle of amber fluid.

Bless those who legalized the new drugs, so an addict needn't commit crimes to support his slow road to hell. He doesn't have to drag others with him, anymore.

He wrapped rubber tubing around his arm and held it tight with his teeth as he posed the needle's tip over the chosen spot. Derek's way of dealing with short-term pain was to make a dramatic moment of it. When he pierced the protruding vein, his face contorted as if to highlight the pain for the back-row balcony.

Even an out-of-work actor had his pride. Derek had never believed in cheating those in the cheap seats, even if some selfish front-row critic thought one was hamming it up a bit.

A small bead of milky liquid welled from the entry hole as he withdrew the syringe and laid it aside. Derek sighed and sank back against his pillow. If he had calculated it right, this time he would go *back*! This time he'd return to the good days, long before...

He closed his eyes as a cool numbness spread up his arm and across his chest. His scalp tingled.

Derek could feel the here and now start to slip away. He tried to concentrate, determined not to let *this* trip get away from him!

Envision a small frame house on Sycamore Street, he told himself, in Albany, New York...

Sycamore Street, so long ago... Mother would be cooking a Sunday supper, Father is reading the paper, and my old room is a clutter of plastic airplane models, touching the air with a faintly heady scent of glue.

The numbness spread down his jaw and spine, and he willed himself back through the files of his cortex, back to Sycamore Street, back to being twelve years old again... back to where a familiar female voice was about to call out...

"Supper's ready!"

It had worked! The new dose had worked! Those were exactly the words he had willed his mother...

"Come on, Lothario! Get your ass out here. I've whipped together a simple, nutritious meal for you. You've got ten minutes to eat and still get to the theater on time!"

The alto voice carried a quaver of emotion, barely suppressed. Derek realized with a sinking feeling that it was *not* his mother, after all.

His eyes opened. The drug had worked. The dingy little fleabag room had been replaced by much richer surroundings. But here were no plastic model airplanes. Rather, drifting glass and metal mobiles reflected opal gleams from two garish lavalamps. A row of plaques and statuettes glittered in a mahogany ego-shrine across from the bed. Underneath he felt the warm vibrations of an expensive automassage

oil-bed.

Derek felt that strange/familiar pressure as his midbrain surged forward to take over. From now on he would be only an observer, unable even to make his eyes blink while the triggered memories replayed perfectly, vividly, out of his control.

Derek felt a silent, internal cry of despair.

This is where I left off last time! I didn't want to come back here. This is too close to the present. I wanted to go back to when I was twelve!

He heard footsteps approach. The door slid swiftly along its rails to bang as it hit the stops. A bright trapezoid of light spilled from the hallway, eclipsed by a slender shadow.

"Well, Derek? Are you going to shave that famous puss and get dressed for the show? Or shall I call Peter and tell him to get your understudy ready again?"

Even the injected form of the damned drug is sequential! I knew it. The thrice-damned stuff takes me forward, one step at a time. I have no choice but to start off each trip reliving where the last one ended!

"Derek?" the figure in the doorway demanded.

"I'll be out in a frigging minute," his midbrain answered—controlling his voice—making it happen exactly as it had three years ago. The playback was adamant, unchangeable.

"Shit!" he growled. "A guy can't even enjoy a little grass in peace, in his own goddamn apartment." He had to fight the cannabis languor to pull himself up onto one elbow, squinting at the brightness from the hall.

"And speaking of piece, where does a bird like you get off talking to me like that? I picked you out of a bloody *chorus line*, gave you your first frigging break, and the best frigging time in your life."

Tall and slender, the woman in the doorway had braided black hair and a dancer's body. He knew that body and the smell of that hair as well as he knew his own. Right now he radiated a loathing tailored by his knowledge of her, enjoying the carefully chosen words with an actor's pride.

"If I weren't so goddamn stoned, I'd show you what an ungrateful bitch like you can do with her frigging nagging!"

There was a long silence. Then the woman nodded resignedly.

"Right," she said softly. Then, with a note of tight control, "All right, Derek. Have it your own way. I've taken on a wife's duties, and for more than a year that's included picking up after your increasingly sloppy body and mind. I thought it worthwhile, and imagined you'd get over your grief like a man. But this time I'm taking you at your word.

"Thanks for the break, Derek. You did get me that first part, and you've paid the rent. I'll only take my clothes with me, and I'll have my agent forward yours a percentage of my next gig."

She paused, as if half hoping against hope that he would speak. But he did not. His eyes were unfocused, following the shimmering globs in the lavalamp.

"Good-bye, Derek."

He had to shade his eyes from the light as her eclipse vanished. He lay back in a floating torpor and a short time later heard the front door slam.

Good frigging riddance, he thought. I can pick up any one of a dozen young things after the show tonight without her around. Life is definitely about to take a turn for the better!

He turned to pick up his smoldering reefer from the ashtray, totally oblivious to a little voice from another time, which cried out plaintively, hopelessly, "*Melissa, please... don't go...*"

2

The waiting room was stark and depressing... paint peeling under sharp fluorescents. The pungency of disinfectant failed to disguise the distinct aroma of urine. Every now and then some waiting client fell into a fit of dispirited coughing. Nobody talked.

Derek hunched in a cracked corner seat, hoping to avoid being noticed. Not that many recognized Derek Blakeney anymore. It had been more than two years since the last spate of scandals and scathing reviews had banished him from the theater columns.

The only serious threat to his apathetic downward spiral had come when a certain critic compassionately eulogized "a lost giant of the stage." Derek had tried to build up a rage over it, but torpidity had prevailed in the end. Now he was thirty pounds lighter and indifferently washed, and it was unlikely anyone would even recognize a onetime star of Broadway. He was probably safe.

A gaunt woman in a white smock periodically emerged to call out numbers. Clients followed her one at a time to a row of cubbyholes against the wall. From the booths came a low mutter of alternating wheedling and officialese. Derek overheard snatches of conversation.

"... You won't get any more Tripastim until your amino acid balance is better, Mr. Saunders... How? By improving your diet of course..."

And another.

"... Here is your allotment, Mrs. Fine. No, first you sign here. Yes, here. And you must drink this vitamin supplement... I've already explained, Mrs. Fine. The government doesn't subsidize your habit because it's your *right*, but in order to drive the Black Chemists out of business. We can undercharge them and see to it you have every chance to kick it if you decide to. Part of the deal is making sure you get

the nutritional..."

Derek closed his eyes. The Liberal-Libertarian coalition had trounced the old Republicans and Democrats in the last election, and Drug Centers like this one were among their first steps on taking office. It had been a good move. Too bad Libertarians were so stingy, though, and the Liberals so damned sanctimonious. If only they'd just give over the doses and shut their bloody—

"Number eighty-seven." The nurse's sharp voice made Derek feel brittle. But it was his number, at last! He stood up."

"I'm number eighty-seven."

The nurse's look seemed to say that what she saw was both pitiable and vaguely loathsome. "Go to station twelve, please," she said, referring to her clipboard. "Ms. Sanchez has your chart."

Derek shook his head. "I wish to see Dr. Bettide. It is a matter of some urgency, requiring the attention of someone with his expertise."

The woman looked up, surprised. Derek felt a moment's satisfaction. He might look like a derelict, but the *voice* was still Derek Blakeney's. It commanded attention.

"Dr. Bettide is very busy," the nurse began uncertainly. "He's good enough to volunteer his time as it is. We only send him referrals from—"

"Just convey him my name, if you please." He handed her one of his last few cards, certain he could recover it. "The doctor will see me, I am certain of it." He smiled, a relaxed expression of assurance and patience.

"Well..." She blushed slightly and decided. "Wait here, please. I'll ask the doctor."

When she had gone, Derek let his expression sag again. Without an audience he folded in upon himself.

Lord, he thought. I hate this overlit, stinking pesthole. I hate the world for having such places in it. And most of all I hate having to beg for the stuff I need in order to get the hell *out* of this goddamn turn-of-the-century world.

It isn't *fair*. All I want to do is go home again! Is that too much to ask? Frigging scientists work wonders these days. Why can't they just send me home again?

3

"It's not fair, I tell you. The injection and the new dose should have taken me back to age twelve! Not thirty-five, but twelve! What's the *matter* with the damn stuff?"

It never occurred to Derek to present a false face to Dr. Melniss Bettide. He acted the age he wanted to be in the presence of the man he hoped would make it possible.

A small, dark man, Dr. Bettide regarded Derek through thick-lensed glasses. Derek grew uncomfortable under the physician's unblinking stare. At last Bettide pressed a button on his intercom.

"Steve, please bring in a double shot of health supplement four."

"Yes, *Doctor*."

"Hey! I don't want vitamins! I want—"

Bettide silenced Derek with a bored wave. "And Steve, please also bring me a carton of the new samples of Temporin B."

Now, that was different! A new *type* of Temporin? Of Time-Jizz? The possibilities were exciting.

Bettide examined Derek's file. "You've been to group therapy regularly, I see."

"They won't give you a drug card if you don't go. It's worth sitting around with a bunch of whining marks for an hour a week, in order not to have to go to the Black Chemists for the stuff."

"Hmmm, yes. But you're still refusing individual treatment?"

"So what? It's not mandatory. Why should I go and spill my guts to some shrink? There's nothing wrong with me."

Derek stopped abruptly, blinking as a flashback hit—a brief, sudden image of a trapezoid of light, then the sound of a slamming door...

He looked down and spoke again in a lower tone. "At least there's nothing wrong with me that the right change of environment wouldn't cure," he muttered.

Dr. Bettide made an entry in Derek's file, a sniff his only comment. Derek shrugged. So the man saw through his sophistries. At least Bettide never lectured like a lot of Liberals would. He suspected the doctor was a Libertarian.

Yeah. Let us go to hell however we want to. It's our own choice, after all.

A pharmacology aide walked in and put down a plastic-capped beaker of orange fluid. Next to it he placed a cardboard box that clinked, the sound of many small bottles. Derek inspected his fingernails as the assistant passed out of the office, ignoring the aide's expression of bored contempt.

"So what's this new type of Time-Jizz, Doctor? Will it work better?"

"Drink." Bettide gestured at the beaker without looking up. He took out a key and unlocked his briefcase, removing a small black ledger.

Derek grimaced and reached for the vitamin supplement, sighing for effect as he pried off the plastic cover. He drank the orange-flavored concoction, knowing Bettide wouldn't help him until it was all gone.

At last he put down the beaker and licked the orange coating from his ragged moustache. "Have they found any more cases like me, Doctor?" For a change his voice was serious, earnest.

"A few," Bettide answered noncommittally, still writing in the small black book.

"Well? Have they found out why some of us get stuck in sequential time trips, instead of just accessing the memories we want at will?"

Bettide closed the book and looked up. "No, Derek. We haven't. But look on the bright side. At least you don't suffer the worst syndrome. Some Temporin users with hidden masochistic tendencies send themselves right off to the worst moments of their lives. A few get into flashback loops where many times each day they relive those episodes in vivid detail, with or without the drug."

Derek blinked. "That's terrible! But..."

A crafty look spread across his face. "Oh, I get it. That's one of those aversion stories, isn't it? Part of trying to get your clients off the very drugs you pass out. Pretty clever. You almost scared me this time."

Bettide shrugged. "Have it your own way, Derek. As to your problem of sequential access, I believe we might have a possible solution."

For once Derek had no comment. He edged forward in his seat.

"Your dilemma," Bettide said, "is to *choose* the memory to be accessed through the drug. Other than volition—which seems to be locked in your case—the only other known way would be to use electronic probing. Unfortunately, that method is out."

"Why?"

"Because the government is not in the business of pandering to destructive and expensive habits that don't already have a criminal purveyor! We provide you Temporin to keep you out of the clutches of the Black Chemists and other underworld sources, and to see that you have every opportunity to freely choose a productive lifestyle again."

"But if this electrical gizmo is the only way..."

"There might be another." Bettide took off his glasses and wiped them. "It's untried, and I certainly wouldn't attempt it. But then, I would never have gotten myself in your fix in the first place. Once again I ask you to accept the coalition's offer to send you to an ecology camp for a rest and work cure, instead." Bettide made his entreaty as if he knew what the answer would be in advance.

Derek felt tense under his scalp. He shook his head vigorously, as if to drive out a threatening uncertainty. "No!... If you won't help me, I'll go to the Black Chemists," he threatened. "I swear, I'll—"

"Oh, stop." Bettide sighed in tired surrender.

Derek's headache vanished just as quickly. "Okay." He brightened. "What do we do?"

"Well try you out on a potent new version of Temporin B the Black Chemists have just developed and we've managed to resynthesize. One hit drives the reliving process about five times longer on average, than the old drug, and at three times the

subjective/objective rate."

"But—but that won't help me get back to where I want to go. It'll only make the sequences go by faster!"

"True. However, some believe your strange type of locked, sequential recall will break down as more recent memories are accessed. You'll have revisited your entire life, so to speak, and no long-term memory will have greater excitation potential than any other."

"I'll have free access again after that?"

"That's my best guess, Derek."

Derek chewed on one end of his moustache. "I'll have to go through some pretty rotten times," he muttered.

"Quickly, yes." Bettide nodded.

"I don't know." Derek knitted his brow.

Bettide closed the file folder. "Well, our time is up. If you can't decide now, we'll just make an appointment for next week."

Derek looked up quickly. "I'll do it! Please. Can we start now?"

Bettide shrugged. He opened the cardboard box and put about a dozen small bottles into a paper bag.

"Sign here." He indicated a release form.

Derek scribbled his signature and took the bottles. They clinked as he rose to go. "Thanks, Doc. I know you're trying to help. Maybe if I can just get some peace for a while—get back to Sycamore Street for a rest—I'll be able to think about things..."

Bettide nodded reservedly. But, as Derek opened the door to leave, the doctor said, "I saw *Realm of Magic* on the Late Show last week, Derek. I enjoyed it a great deal. You were very good in that film, even if you were better on the stage."

Derek half turned, but couldn't make himself meet the physician's eyes. He nodded, clutching the bag, and left quickly without shutting the door behind him.

4

The amber-white fluid enticed, and he sought salvation in the past...

Enola Gay closed before summer. He hadn't much liked the part, anyway. It made him nervous. Claude Eatherly, the protagonist, was a hard mind to get into.

No matter. When Peter Tiersjens hired a fresh-faced kid for the road show, that suited Derek fine. He was getting sick of Peter and his damned sanctimony anyway. At the last cast party the elderly director tried to give Derek some "fatherly advice." Derek fumed in his cups.

"The Catskills? The fucking Catskills? Jesus, Peter! What kind of shit have you got for brains? What would I do in the friggin' Catskills over the whole summer? I went there as a kid and all I can remember is being bored enough to kill myself, while my mother and father listened to accordion music and the sound of their arteries hardening!"

Derek tossed back the last of his drink. He took a cube from the ice chest on his dressing table and dropped it into the glass. His hands shook a little as he poured two jiggers of gin after it, spilling some onto the marble tabletop.

The sounds of the cast party could be heard through a crack in the door. Old Peter Tiersjens sat back in a folding chair, his feet propped up on a box of costumes. He took off his wire-rimmed glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Derek, I am thinking of you. What will you do now that the show has closed? Do you have any other offers? Do you have savings?"

Derek shrugged. "My agent says he's looking over the off-season possibilities. But most of them are out in the sticks, so maybe I'll just stay in the city this summer. Who knows? I may get a call from the Coast for another movie." Derek sipped at his drink. Already the evening was shimmering in a fine inebriated gloss—like gauze over a camera lens. He would be grateful for the fog later, when he went out to select a bed partner from the groupies. The Vaseline vagueness would make the stalest teeny-bopper shine like Fay Wray. It was easy to forget Melissa when he was loaded.

"Derek..." There was a long pause as Tiersjens grew uncharacteristically reticent. Derek experienced the strangest sense of *déjà vu*, almost as if he knew the director's very words before they were spoken.

"Derek, there will be no offers from Hollywood. Your name is mud out there, has been, ever since you walked out on *Tunnel in the Sky*. Who would hire you after that? To be honest, Derek, your taking the Catskills job wouldn't be a great favor to me. It's my way of trying, one last time, to help you."

Derek sneered. "Like you *helped* me by hiring that snot-nosed Todd Chestner to play Eatherly on the road? Dumping me in the process?"

"Don't blame that on Todd. The kid idolizes you, Derek. I did it for the good of the show. Todd's been covering for you half of the time anyway. Anyone but me would have replaced you three months ago."

"But Derek, I am willing to give it one more go, for old times' sake. *Take* the Catskills job, and get off this cycle of self-destruction while there's still a chance!"

For a moment, Derek found himself captured by the man's intensity. Peter Tiersjens could take a platoon of blasé actors and light the fire of Melpomene inside them with a few words. "Derek," he urged. "You used to say there was nothing more contemptible than the artist who lost himself on the Edge. Now you are sacrificing everything on the altar of Bacchus. 'Tis mad idolatry to make the service greater than the god!"

In the half-drunken fog, Derek's belligerent side won a brief, but bitter, struggle.

"Cry, Troyans, Cry!" He mocked the older man, quoting from the same play. "Cassandra, you can go to hell." He stood up and walked unsteadily to the door. On the way he kicked Peter's chair. His fists clenched in pleasure at the resultant shout and crash, and he left without looking back.

Later he had the satisfaction of punching Todd Chestner in his fatuous, earnest young face. It would take makeup an extra half hour to get the twerp ready, during the first week of the road show. That was some satisfaction, at least.

After that, though, even the groupies drew back. And that evening he went home alone.

"Uh!"

Derek awakened suddenly from the drug-induced playback. He shuddered, and for a long time just lay there on the unkempt mattress, breathing.

The new drug certainly did release a charged, totally vivid experience. It also drew out the playbacks more rapidly.

All he had to do was somehow endure the next three years' worth of memory recall. *That's all.* At this rate it shouldn't take more than a couple of weeks, real time. A few more weeks, then, if Bettide was right, it would be back to the golden years!

Derek had come to believe the drug did more than simply play back chemical memories inscribed in the brain. He was half convinced it actually took one *back*. Personally. And when the bad times were through he would be free once more to cycle back to childhood... to model airplanes and long summer afternoons... to ice cream and the sweetness of precocious first love... to a time when there were no regrets.

He got up, stretching to ease a crick in his back, and slipped a Diet-Perf dinner into the rusty old microwave. He barely tasted the meal when he spooned it down.

Derek got out the log Dr. Bettide had given him. Success depended on the physician's goodwill, so he wrote down the times and places he had returned to... avoiding mention of the nasty little personal details. They were irrelevant, anyway.

He watched the Late Show on TV until, at last, sleep arrived. Then came the inevitable struggle with his dreams, trying to make them conform to his will. But they were not pliant, and had their way with him.

"Blakeney, just who do you think you are? This is the third time you've come in late and stoned, and gotten belligerent with the audience! We may be a small-time company, but we've got our reputations to consider..."

"Reputations!" Derek sniffed noisily. He had been doing a lot of coke lately and his sinuses stung. That only made him angrier. "Reputations, my eye! You're a bunch of diapered juveniles pandering to tourists in a little uptown improv club,

calling yourselves actors. Here I am, willing to lend you my name and my services, and you talk to me about *reputations*?"

"Why, you conceited windbag!" One of the young men had to be physically restrained. Derek grinned as the others held the fellow back, knowing they would never dare back up their bluster with physical force.

"Conceit, my young friend, is a matter of interpretation. It's all relative. Haven't you learned that yet?" He rolled his eyes heavenward. "I try so hard to pass on what I know, yet the next generation is obdurate!"

One of the older youths stepped before Derek.

"Yes, Mr. Blakeney, you have taught us a thing or two."

Derek smiled back benignly. But the fellow was not apologizing.

"You've given a bunch of hungry young actors an object lesson in the dangers of success, Mr. Blakeney. You've shown us how far the mighty can fall, when arrogance substitutes for self-respect. For teaching us that, we'll slice you a percentage of the rest of the shows this month. It won't be necessary for you to return."

Derek snarled. "You can't do that! We have a contract!"

"We also have witnesses to your foulmouthed abuse of paying customers, Mr. Blakeney. You can treat us like dirt beneath your feet, but mistreating the marks is something any court in the land will recognize as just cause. Sue us, or send your agent around. But don't show up in person or we'll call the cops."

"Yeah," one of the girls said. "And if that doesn't work, we'll break your arm!"

Derek stood very still, his breath hissing angrily through clenched teeth. He dragged his memory for an appropriate quotation... something Shakespearean and devastatingly apropos to the ingratitude and treachery of youth.

He couldn't come up with anything.

His mind was blank!

The blood drained out of his face and he clutched the stair rail. With a titanic effort he straightened his shoulders and turned so the young actors wouldn't see. He was out on the sidewalk before he trusted himself to breathe again.

I couldn't improvise a comeback to devastate those cretins! What's the matter with me?

For an instant an unwelcome idea penetrated... the possibility that Peter had been right, that these punks were right.

The thought seared. It was too hot to be allowed to settle in. He drove it out by thinking about...

About getting high.

Yeah. Somewhere there must be a drug to help. Uppers did the trick when there was work to do. Downers helped him sleep. Somewhere there had to be a drug

that'd bring back happiness.

All I need is a little peace. Then I could get my thoughts together. Make a plan. There oughta be a jizz to help me get through the summer. I'll straighten out this fall.

Melissa won't approve, of course. She'll want me to clean up my act overnight—

What am I saying? Melissa's been gone almost a year!

He felt very odd, like a man standing at a crossroads, undecided over which way to go and afraid that it was already too late to turn back. That sense of *déjà vu* returned again, filling him with a dreadful feeling that he had been this way before, and was doomed to choose wrong again. And again.

Unsteadily, he walked down Forty-seventh street, past the shops and the pedicabs, and the occasional licensed automobile. Flywheel jitneys hummed by, picking up tourists on their way to the Village or downtown.

Slowly, the unease began to dissipate. It was summer in New York. Hardly a time and place for heavy thinking.

I'll go see Barney, he decided. Maybe he's heard of something on the street. Something to get me up.

"They call it Time-Jizz." Barney handed Derek a packet of white powder. "It's the latest thing out o' the Black Chemists. Man, this time they've really stolen a march on the guv'mint. Time-Jizz is the biggest thing there is now."

"What it is, man? What's it do, bro?" Derek unconsciously adopted the dialect of his supplier, mimicking the street tempo perfectly.

"Mooch-hooch, baby. With this stuff you can go back to any limber scene you ever had, and *relive* it. I mean, I tried it an' it works! I went back to the best lay I ever had, and man, I found out my memory weren't exaggeratin' one bit. Mmm-mmm."

Derek fingered the packet. "I dunno, Barney. A new blam-scam from the Black Chemists... I don't want no junkie-monkey, now."

"Aw, the shrinks have had this stuff f'years!" the dealer soothed. "Word is it's safe. No monkey, for sure, babe. And you get to choose the time and place you go back and visit! Shoot. A deal like that makes you think them Black Chemists were really brothers after all, and not a bunch of old white syndicate clowns with Pee aitch Dees."

The powder glistened in the light from a bare bulb. Derek stared at it.

"Anywhere or anytime I wanted..."he murmured.

"Yeah, man, you could go back to when you were suckin' Baby Ruths and peekin' up girls' dresses."

"My childhood was a boring crock." Derek snickered. "Still," he added thoughtfully. "It had its moments. Anyway, as the serpent used to say, why not?"

He looked up and saw the dealer was staring at him. "George Bernard Shaw," he

explained. "From *Back to Methuselah*."

"Sure, man." Barney shrugged. "Anything you say. Now about the price. Startin' out I can offer you a real sweet deal..."

Derek came home to his cheap studio to find the mail slot filled with bills. He shut the door with his foot and let the envelopes slip to the floor. He poured a can of soup into a pan and stirred it over a hotplate. He contemplated a small vial of amber fluid, one of Bettide's ampules, on the counter in front of him.

Derek felt trapped. He had been accessing increasingly recent memories, more and more painful to face. He wasn't sure he could go through the final two years' worth of total recall.

He would be gambling the pain of recent memories against Dr. Bettide's hypothetical "breakthrough"... when all the storage in his mind would supposedly be his again, reachable at will.

Reliving that episode with the kids at the improv—and then his first purchase of Time-Jizz from dealer Barney—had driven him away from the drug for a few days. He had walked around in a depressed haze, getting stoned on older, less terrifying highs.

He hung around a few theaters, milking a few tourists who recognized him. He ignored their whispers to each other after he finished signing autographs.

Finally, he found himself at the office of Frank Furtess, his old agent. Old Frankfurter had looked genuinely surprised to see him. Then Derek remembered. He had fired Furtess more than a year ago, using nearly every piece of invective in the book.

Derek realized that he had adopted a frame of reference twenty months old, and momentarily forgotten the incident! By then he had already shaken the agent's hand; he had to play the scene to its end.

The meeting was chilly. Furtess promised to look into a few possibilities. Derek left his landlady's phone number, but he figured the man would throw it away the moment he left.

Now, to come home and find all these bills, and royalties so scant these days...

It was late afternoon, and once again the ripped windowshade cast the legs of a runner on the wall. The jogger's slow, mute progress was a tale of perseverance.

Derek plucked up the ampule and moved over to the mattress on the dusty floor. He broke the seal and held the needle to his arm... He...

... mixed the powder carefully in his Fifth Avenue apartment. In the light from the lava lamp he poured the mixture into a glass and drank it, as Barney had told him to do.

He sat back in the relaxing hum of his vibrochair and avoided thinking about how he was going to keep up the rent on this expensive flat. Instead, he tried to focus on

some event in his childhood. Almost anything would do for a test of the new drug.

Ah, he thought. Model-making with Douglas Kee, the gardener's boy! We did have fun, didn't we? We were pals. What age was I then, ten years old?

He closed his eyes as a pleasant numbness washed over him. He thought about glue, and plastic, and little sticky decals...

... and found himself laughing!

The laughter was high and clear. It startled him, but he couldn't stop! He was no longer in control of his body. Someone *else* was in command.

In a sudden flow of visual images, he saw that he was no longer in his apartment. Sunlight streamed in to fall on a cracked linoleum floor. Dust gathered in clumps under worn furniture and stacks of old newspapers. In one corner of the room a calico kitten played with a ball of string. Through a half-opened door came a steady breeze of sunwarmed fresh air.

But he caught all of this out of a corner of his field of vision. At the moment he could not make his eyes shift from a pile of plastic odds and ends on the floor in front of him. He caught a glimpse of his own hands and was momentarily shaken by how small they were. They moved nimbly among the plastic bits, fitting them together experimentally.

"Maybe we could glue that extra piece of the ol' Cutty Sark onto here and make a radar antenna out of it!"

Derek's gaze shifted to his left. Next to him was a small boy with Oriental features.

And yet he didn't look so very small right now. In fact the boy was larger than himself!

Once again Derek found himself laughing, high and uninhibited. "Sure, stick a mast of a sailing ship on an intergalactic warp vessel. Why not?"

The voice was unmistakably his own. He felt his own mouth and larynx form the words. But it was a smaller voice, and a younger, more intense volition that shaped it. The adult part of himself began to understand.

I'm back to when I was ten. It worked. The drug worked!

Now he was getting more than physical sensations. The thoughts of that happy ten-year-old come rushing in, threatening to wash all sense of adulthood aside.

He tried to make the flow two-way... to communicate with the boy. But it was hopeless. The child was only a memory, playing back now in vivid detail. It could not be changed.

Gradually, all awareness of being anything but the boy fell away, as he learned to let go and just observe.

"Hey! Hey! I got it!" Derek-the-child shouted. "Let's put a glob of glue over this

guy's head and call it a space helmet!"

"Naw. That's a Civil War Union guy. What'd he be doing with a space helmet?"

"Well, with the glue on his head who could tell?" Derek giggled. "And *he* wouldn't care. Not with a ton of glue to sniff!"

The boys laughed together. *Derek* laughed along.

"I want to go back to the old drug, now. I want to slow down again."

Dr. Bettide jotted a comment in his little black notebook.

"Have you finished reviewing your memories up to the present?"

"No. I don't want to do that now."

"Why? I thought your objective was to make available, once more, the memories of childhood."

Derek grinned. "I've *done* that!"

Bettide frowned. "I'm not certain I understand."

"It's simple, really. I've finally started reliving the point, eighteen months ago, when I first started taking the drug."

"Yes? And?"

"And now I'm recalling perfect memories of recalling perfect memories of childhood!"

Bettide stared at him, blinking first in confusion, then in growing amazement. Derek relished it.

I must be the first, he realized. The first ever to have done this. Why, that makes me some kind of explorer, doesn't it? An explorer of inner space?

"But Derek, you'll also be reliving some of the worst times of your life—the eviction, for instance, and the lawsuits."

Derek shrugged. "Most of that time I was in a Time-Jizz stupor. And it felt like I was in the past six to ten hours for every hour in the present. It was worth it then, it'll be worth it again."

Bettide frowned. "I must think on this, Derek. There may be unforeseen consequences. I'd like to have you come out to the institute for some tests..."

Derek shook his head. "Uh-uh. You can't force me. I'm grateful, Doctor. Accidentally you've given me the key. But if you stop helping me, I'll go to the Black Chemists."

"Derek..."

"You think about it, Doc." Derek got up, knowing he had the advantage. Obviously, the physician wanted to keep him in sight, to observe this new twist.

"I'll come back in a week, Doctor Bettide. If you have refills ready for me, I'll tell you all about it." He couldn't help letting a little Vincent Price slip into his voice.

"Otherwise..."

Involuntarily Bettide shivered. Derek laughed and swept out of the office.

"Darling, don't go in the water! You'll get your cast wet!"

"Aw, Mom!"

"I mean it!"

Derek shrugged and kicked a stone along the sandy lake shore. He savored the feeling of being unjustly persecuted, though at the root of it he knew his mother was right. This way, though, he could nurse just a little more mileage out of his broken arm.

Actually, it had been frightening when it happened. He had fractured it waterskiing early in the summer. But now it seemed like the best thing that ever happened to him. All the girls whose families were summering by the lake competed to fuss over him.

Tonight that precocious little bundle Jennifer Smythe was going to take him to auditions at the Junior Theater in Big Bear. He hadn't wanted to go, at first, but when she began making promises about what they would do afterward, he grew more interested.

Who knows? Derek mused. Maybe they'll offer me a part in the play. Now, wouldn't that be something?

High overhead, a big Boeing 787 growled across the sky. At one time Derek had thought he might want to be a pilot, or an astronaut. Now he watched the plane cynically. That was patsy's work. There had to be something better—something that would make people want to pay him just to be himself...

He smiled as he thought of Jennifer. The sunshine was warm on his well-tanned back. He felt, as he often did, on the verge of a great adventure. Anticipation was delicious.

"Oh, Derek! You were wonderful!"

"Was I really?"

"You heard Mrs. Abell. She's rewriting the male lead so he has a broken arm! And you pretend you aren't interested."

"Oh, sure I am." He laughed. "Only right now I'm interested in something else even more!"

Jennifer giggled and took his hand. "Come on. I know a place by the boat sheds."

"Mr. Blakeney, you owe four months' payments on your condominium. If you don't remit within a week, we'll be forced to finalize the foreclosure proceedings..."

Derek slammed the door in the attorney's face. "I'll send some money when my next royalty check comes in!" he shouted through the door. Then he turned away

and forgot the matter. He had more important problems than some jerk worried about late rent.

He had run out of Time-Jizz. And Barney, his supplier, had jacked up the prices beyond what he could afford. "It's the Black Chemists," the dealer had complained. "They upped the price on me. I gotta pass it on."

Derek knew what he had to do. He would go to the new government drug rehab center on Eighth Avenue. They were bragging about how they'd maintain a junkie and give him food, just to keep him "out of the cycle of crime and death."

Okay, he told himself. I'll just go down there and see if they mean it.

He didn't even notice that he had crossed the line to calling himself a junkie.

"Hello. I am Dr. Melniss Bettide. I'll be supervising your case, Mr..." The small dark man peered at the name on the chart.

"Good heavens!" he gasped. "You're Derek Blakeney!" The physician pronounced the name as if he were making a rare and stunning diagnosis.

Derek forced one of his famous, confident smiles. "Fame is like a river, that beareth up things light and swoln..." He shrugged nonchalantly. "Would you like an autograph, Doctor?"

"Honey! It's Derek's agent on the phone! He says Derek has won the part!"

They thought he was asleep. His father had finally sent him to bed, rather than let him continue pacing, hitting the walls. But that didn't keep him from waking the instant the telephone rang.

"Are you sure?" He heard his father's voice, muffled by his bedroom door. "I don't want to wake the poor kid with rumors if he's just going to be let down."

"Well, come and talk to the man yourself, then... Just a moment, Mr. Pasternak. My husband is coming to the phone."

Derek overheard murmured talk of allowances and percentages, of shooting schedules and tutors to make up for lost schooling... His father was being boorishly insistent about the latter, but Derek didn't really mind.

He remembered the auditions—all those poor kids being dragged around by their crazy stage mothers, and *he* had won the part!

Why, Mom didn't even care if I made it. She just thought it would be fun to try! Dad too had been helpful in his gruff, skeptical way. Derek let them have their moment, fussing over the phone with the agent. His turn would come with the new day.

"Hollywood," he sighed in false cynicism. "Oh, well. It's not Broadway, but it's a start." He couldn't help grinning under the covers... wondering if California girls were all they were supposed to be.

I'll find out, he thought. Real soon.

I'm going to be a star.

Making friends with a movie dog... learning the ways of the back lot... sailing a catamaran on location in Papeete... fencing lessons in Beverly Hills—and other lessons from a beautiful older actress at night in her apartment...

His first drag of reefer... two years dodging teenage girls who swooned at the sight of him while he played *Dobie in Orbit* on TV...

Singing and dancing up a storm in the Broadway version of *Borgia!*... getting plastered with friends

... pulling crazy stunts... getting an Academy Award nomination for his role in *Another Roadside Attraction*.

Somehow, he managed to find a place in a fleabag hotel where the rent was cheap. The landlady had loved his movies and seen every one of his plays. The people at the condominium complex held his awards and his furniture in bond for payments due.

They let him take the lavalamps.

Derek didn't care. Between the serving of the eviction notice and moving into the dingy little room, he had relived ten of the best years of his life. It wasn't a bad deal at all.

He replayed that year when he had led the cast of *Potemkin at Midnight*... and had begun to hear those muttered complaints—that he was becoming self-indulgent, for instance, and intractable in his interpretations. He spurned the critics and went his own way, of course. If the reviewers groused, let them! The marks were happy. And there was always somebody eager to send 'out for a little more champagne—a little more coke.

Fagin's Boys, and Girls closed early, but that was because of bad directing and a flawed script. He never much liked musicals, anyway, except for the chicks in the chorus line, of course.

That Three Vee pilot for a series based on the cartoon writers of the fifties was an interesting project, but the cretins botched it with endless rewrite. It ran three months. No matter. There would always be something else.

Two weeks after moving into the fleabag, he met Melissa for the first time, again... not in this life, but in his memory.

He took her home to the Fifth Avenue condo. Her laughter was sweeter than music. Her wit was sharp and brilliant. He had had many lovers with dancers' bodies, but hers was special.

In her he found not just pleasure, but joy.

"Derek, honey, please wake up."

"Hmmmph. What? Liss, what is it?"

She held the phone to her breast. There were tears in her eyes.

Derek looked up in a fog. He had had one too many nightcaps.

"Liss? What's the matter?"

"It's Frank Furtess. He was up early and heard it on the radio. He figured we'd want to be told, and not find out in the morning papers."

"Derek, the Divine Terror Alignment has struck again... Honey, they've nuked Albany."

Her voice was stark. Hollow with sadness. It took a moment for the words to soak in.

Albany?

"Blown... up? The whole town?"

"Oh, baby. I'm so sorry."

At first all he could think of were *buildings*—the library, the high school, the drugstore in his neighborhood, all tumbled to the ground and smoking. The park, the capitol, his parents' house.

"Mom!" he croaked, sitting up. "Dad!"

He reached out, but not for the telephone.

Melissa held him while he sobbed. It had been almost a year since he had seen either of his parents in person. The last time he had been so casual... he had even left without bothering to say good-bye.

This is no good, Derek thought as he came down from that particular memory trip. I'm reliving the bad stuff, now. I'd better get some advice on how to get control over this drug... learn how to force it to draw out only the memories I want. Maybe I'll talk to that guy Bettide.

No. This just won't do at all.

He dreamt that night. Real dreams, not memories. He dreamt about smoke and fire and guilt. And he wept because there was nobody there to hold him this time around.

This is no good, Derek thought as he came down. I'm reliving the bad stuff *again*. Even down to those awful dreams I had when I first realized the drug was going bad. Maybe Bettide was right after all.

Oh, hell, what am I going to do *now*?

Things perked up a bit when he played Anton Perceveral in *The Minimum Man*, though the critics gave most of the credit for its success to the writers of the adaptation, and to Peter Tiersjens, who directed. Derek nursed his jealousy but said nothing. For a long time he was listless except when he was on stage.

The crowds identified with Perceveral, but he just couldn't.

Melissa nursed him, teased him, cared for him. He let himself be talked into doing Falstaff over the summer, and hated it.

Peter got him the role of the decade—playing Claude Eatherly in *Enola Gay*. If anything could snap him out of his doldrums, that part should have.

It worked, sort of. He stopped moping and became arrogant. He snapped and lashed out and drank and snorted and smoked. He came home with the scent of other women on his clothes. Derek witnessed himself witnessing it all over again. He writhed within and tried to relive the experience without participating at all.

Yet a glimmer of his present self remained awake to notice things... things he had not seen the first time around. A piece of mail tossed in a corner. A misplaced phone message. A promise forgotten the initial time through, but noted on this passage...

It didn't seem to make any difference, though. The past was fixed. The mistakes and casual cruelties repeated inerrantly. Derek struggled not to watch, but started taking larger and larger doses of the drug.

On the wall of his little room the legs of the runner approached the finish line...

Derek thought about Sycamore Street, Albany, New York... where his mother would be cooking a Sunday supper, his father would be reading the paper, and his room was a clutter of plastic models, filling the air with the heady scent of glue. He willed himself back to age twelve... back to a place in the warehouse of his cortex where a familiar female voice was about to call out...

"Supper's ready!"

Derek smiled (*foolish smile*, the latest Derek thought). It had worked! Those were exactly the words he had willed his mother...

"Come on, Lothario..." Melissa slid the door open and Derek witnessed a former self being surprised, and a still earlier self snarl and curse. As the woman made her decision, and turned to leave, he felt, simultanously:

"*Good riddance!*"

"*Melissa, don't go!*"

And this time added, "Oh, shut up, you fool, can't you see she's gone for good?"

"Drink." Bettide gestured without looking up.

Derek grimaced but drank the supplement. "Have they found any more cases like me, doc?"

Bettide licked his pencil. "A few."

"As to your problem of sequential memory access," he went on. "I think we might have a possible solution."

Derek edged forward to listen.

Derek awoke in a sweat. He shivered as he realized what was happening. The sequential memories were rapidly approaching the present. Soon he would begin recalling memories of recalling memories of recalling memories!

Where would it end?

He lay in the damp bed and wondered for the first time about the nature of his present existence.

He checked his own reality by every test he could devise—from pinching himself to reciting Shaw backward—but none of them proved for certain that he had never been this way before... that he had free will and was not merely reliving another memory at this very moment, in some future self's Temporin-induced trip.

"I expected something like this might happen, Derek. But you must be stalwart. Remember Anton Perceveral? Stick with it and I think we can get out the other side."

Derek's hand shook as he drank the required supplement. He put down the beaker and looked from Bettide to the little black notebook and back. "I'm just an experiment to you," he accused.

Bettide shrugged. "Partly, perhaps. You are also my patient. And an artist who I would dearly like to return to society. Fortunately all three imperatives make for a common goal. Now, *will* you agree to coming to the clinic so I can keep you under observation?"

Derek lowered his head into his hands. "I don't know. I just don't know. I'm lost in Time, Doctor. My thoughts and memories are a whirlwind. Nothing stands *still* anymore!"

For a long moment there was silence in the cubicle, broken only by the muttering of the ventilation system. Then Bettide spoke softly.

*"But thoughts, the slaves of Life,
and Life, Time's fool,
And time, that takes a survey of all the world,
Must have a stop."*

Derek looked up and blinked. For a clear moment the shabby office seemed built wholly of crystal—the clocks all halted—and the breath of the Universe held in

expectant quiet. Light refracted through the diamond walls.

He knew, right then, that this moment was a new one, whether remembered a thousand times or not... even if witnessed by a hundred thousand versions of himself.

Each instant is itself, and nothing more. Each a heartbeat of Cod.

The epiphany passed with another blink of his eyes. Bettide wiped his glasses and looked at Derek myopically, awaiting an answer.

"I'll let you know, Doctor," Derek said quietly as he stood up. "I will be back tomorrow. I promise."

"AH right, Derek. I'll tell the receptionist to let you in at any time."

Derek paused at the door.

"Thank you," he said softly. Then he went out into the wintry afternoon.

The park was nearly empty. Derek climbed the steps to the Summer Theater. He stood on the stage and looked up at the city for over an hour, not moving or speaking, but nevertheless playing a part.

The ampule gleamed in the light from the torn windowshade. Derek looked at the little glass vial and decided he at last understood Anton Perceveral.

What else have we, he thought, when we have mined ourselves a tunnel all the way to Hell, than the option of digging further and hoping for a world that's round?

"I saw *Realm of Magic* on the Late Show last week, Derek. You were very good..."

... the runner on the wall lengthened his stride.

Enola Gay closed before summer...

"The Catskills? Jeeze, Peter, what would I do in the friggin' Catskills?"

... He had the satisfaction of punching Todd Chestner... but even the groupies drew back after that... He went home alone...

"Mr. Blakeney, you've given some young actors an object lesson in the dangers of success..."

"It's called Time-Jizz... The latest thing from th' Black Chemists..."

He came home to his fleabag to find a pile of bills... He broke the seal and held the ampule over his vein...

... mixed the powder and drank, thinking about glue and plastic and little sticky decals...

... and found himself laughing... high, clear childish laughter.

Derek relived Derek reliving Derek reliving... The boys laughed together and Derek laughed along. But this time he struggled not to lose consciousness. He was ten again. But ten was no longer a goal. It was a way station. He lived as the child again, but this time he watched.

"Darling, don't go into the water!"

"Aw, Mom!"

But Jennifer had made slightly veiled promises... overhead a jet plane growled... At one time he had wanted to be a pilot, but that was patsy's work...

"Oh, Derek, you were wonderful!"

"Mr. Blakeney, you owe four months' rent..."

"... the Black Chemists have upped the price."

"Good Lord!" Bettide hissed. "You're Derek Blakeney!"

"Honey! The agent says Derek's got the part!"

... Making friends with a movie dog... an older actress at night... first reefer... teenage girls swooning... a fleabag hotel where he could continue taking the drug and relive leading the cast of *Another Roadside* ... Meeting Melissa, her laughter sweet, her smile bright... joy...

"Derek, honey, the terrorists..." She held him... but then she wasn't there to hold him anymore.

The scenes flickered from a plush condominium to a cheap room. From cheering audiences to downer reviews. Somewhere in the midst of it all Derek realized that he was replaying memories that had accumulated at the beginning of *this* very session with the drug... that like Achilles chasing the hare, he was parsing his life into more and more rapid cycles. The closer he got to the "present," the more cycles had accumulated and the more densely packed they were—each a lifetime to be relived!

"But thoughts, the slaves of Life—"

Bless the Mercy Law, he thought, opening the shoe box... The runner passed the edge of the doorway. "Supper's ready!"

"Good-bye, Derek." The door slammed.

"Good riddance..."

"Melissa, don't go!"

"You fool, she's gone."

This time he added, "Yes, she's gone. But do you care enough to *follow* her?"

Derek grimaced and sipped the supplement... "Have they found any more like me, Doc?..."

"I saw *Realm of Magic* on the Late Show."

"What would I do in the friggin' *Catskills*?"

Even the groupies drew back...

"...an object lesson in the dangers of..."

"They call it Time-Jizz..."

... picked up the ampule...

... mixed the powder,

... picked up the ampule...

... found himself laughing, high and clear.

and laughed along

and laughed along

and laughed along but watched

and carefully watched...

"*And Time, that takes survey of all the world—*"

The runner found his stride...

"Good-bye, Derek."

"Good riddance..."

"Don't go!"

"You fool, she's gone."

"Yes, but do you care enough to follow her?"

"*How, you idiot? How can I follow when the past is locked, and the flashbacks multiply faster than I can experience them? I can't even get off.*"

Derek sipped. "... any more like me, Doc?..."

"... saw *Realm of Magic* ..."

"... friggin' *Catskills* ..."

"... object lesson..."

"They call it Time-Jizz..."

... picked up the ampule...

... picked up the ampule...
... picked up the ampule...
... mixed the powder...
... found himself laughing.

... and laughed along and laughed along and laughed along but watched and watched and watched and watched.

"And Time—"

"—Good riddance..."
"—Don't go."
"—She's gone."
"—Will you follow?"
"—How? I can't even get off!"
Derek added another layer.
He laughed... high and clear.

"Must have a stop—"

The runner persevered. There really wasn't anything else to do.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

A treasured colleague and friend is my brother Dan, a newspaperman and veteran of the City News Bureau of Chicago, who was so fierce and on target in his scrawled comments on my early work that I decided I had better get writing gooder quick!

Seriously, I do believe useful criticism is an author's lifeblood. No story of mine is published without being read by a dozen or more selected people well in advance. Those who can't find something to criticize, something needing improvement, tightening, or polishing, are dropped from my list with my thanks. Only by hearing the bad news can I improve. Dan taught me that.

It was Dan's idea to do a piece about a memory drug. This is his story, as much as mine.

"A Stage of Memory" is also a tale about ego. We are probably the first civilization whose paramount heroes are entertainers. (Most others have admired

warriors above all else.) Worshiping movie and rock stars may be a slight improvement, but it has its drawbacks. Crowing up near Hollywood, I got to see more than I wanted of what "ego rage" can do to people, especially when all one hears are the trumpets of praise.

The long road to hell can be traveled by not listening to others, or by listening and believing them too much.

Sic transit gloria. Remember where you're standing.